

# THE JANUS FACES OF EVIL

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- 5) Sinema

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- 1) Ethics
- 2) Violence
- 3) Terrorism
- 4) Psycho-sociological Pr.
- 5) Film

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## 1. Introduction

Evil has always been one of the most attractive topics for philosophers and theologians throughout the history of Western thought; the problem of evil has occupied a large part of the history of ethics. The questions surrounding the evils of the world troubled the Greek mind in almost every succeeding age, with different dimensions in philosophy, poetry, theology, and practical affairs; and understanding evil was a huge task for almost all the medieval thinkers. Moderns, too, were deeply moved by evil; from Kant to Hegel, Schelling, Nietzsche, and Freud, to Levinas, Bataille and Arendt. So much so that attempts recently have been made to write alternative histories of Western philosophy in which evil has been the central point of reference.<sup>1</sup>

Evil plays a significant role in contemporary thought, as well. The catastrophes of the last century and their philosophical assessments as well as more recent acts of excessive violence or natural disasters in different regions of the world have resulted in an extensive and effectual literature on the issue, with the contributions of the most influential philosophers of our times.

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<sup>1</sup> See for example Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought, An Alternative History of Philosophy*, Princeton University Press, 2002; Richard J. Bernstein, *Radical Evil*, Polity Press, 2002; *The Many Faces of Evil*, ed. Amelie Oksenberg Rorty, Routledge, 2001.

But today we are in a new era considering ‘evil studies’. Evil is no longer treated as a subject matter for interrogation within ethics, although traditionally it had been nothing more. Today it is rather a given situation that determines what ethics should be. To quote from Alain Badiou:

(...) ethics designates today a principle that governs how we relate to *what is going on*, a vague way of regulating our commentary on historical situations (the ethics of human rights), technico-scientific situations (medical ethics, bio-ethics), social situations (the ethics of being-together), media situations (the ethics of communication), and so on<sup>2</sup> (...) Ethics is conceived here both as an a priori ability to discern evil (for according to the modern usage of ethics, evil – or the negative – is primary: we presume a consensus regarding what is barbarian), and as the ultimate principle of judgement, in particular political judgement...<sup>3</sup>

9/11 marks the beginning of an even more concentrated appeal to this conception of evil. Since 9/11, the Western interest in evil has grown dramatically, and the term has acquired an even more interesting role in current political and philosophical discussions. Since then, not only scholars from almost all disciplines of social sciences but also politicians and media of the whole Western world have been speaking about various themes around evil and seem to know ‘what exactly evil is’. A quotation like ‘Today our nation saw evil, the very worst of human nature’<sup>4</sup> would suffice to summarize the basic arguments of this attitude.

It was Richard J. Bernstein who, only ten days before the catastrophic event, completed the manuscript of his book, *Radical Evil*,<sup>5</sup> one of the alternative histories of

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<sup>2</sup> Alain Badiou, *Ethics, An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans. Peter Hallward, Verso, 2001, p. 2.

<sup>3</sup> Alain Badiou, *Ethics, An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, p. 8.

<sup>4</sup> George W. Bush, Address to the Nation, September 11, 2001.

<sup>5</sup> Richard J. Bernstein, *The Abuse of Evil*, Polity Press, 2005, p. vii.

philosophy in which evil is the central point of reference. A couple of months after the timely publication of his book, Bernstein could not stop thinking that the post-9/11 ‘evil talks’ were not quite like the traditional philosophical interrogations of evil, because while ‘the discourse of evil in our religious, philosophical and literary traditions has been intended to provoke *thinking*, questioning, and inquiry (...) today, the appeal to evil is being used as a political tool to obscure complex issues, to block genuine thinking, and to stifle public discussion and debate.’<sup>6</sup> It was for this reason that Bernstein wrote a new book, published in 2005, and named it ‘The Abuse of Evil’. In contrast with today’s consensus, Bernstein maintains that, ‘...[i]nterrogating evil is an ongoing, open-ended process. Throughout I have indicated my skepticism about the very idea of a theory of evil, if this is understood as a complete account of what evil is. I do not think that such a theory is possible, because we cannot anticipate what new forms of evil or vicissitudes of evil will appear.’<sup>7</sup>

It is clear that the evil that is ‘being used as a political tool to obscure complex issues, to block genuine thinking, and to stifle public discussion and debate’ can be used as such a tool only when it is assumed to be completely depoliticized, i.e., self-evident and thus completely close to critical questioning. That is to say, in our philosophical and political discourses today, evil is ‘self-evident’, and both this ‘self-evidence’ and this conception of ‘evil’ are problematic.<sup>8</sup>

Therefore today, in the midst of the banality of these ‘evil-talks’, it is important 1) to stick to the idea of ‘subjectivity of evil’; 2) to emphasize the political

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. viii.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. vii.

<sup>8</sup> Christopher Cox and Molly Whalen, “On Evil: An Interview with Alain Badiou”, *Cabinet Magazine Online*, Issue 5, Winter 2001/02. (<http://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/5/alainbadiou.php>)

implications of current conceptions of evil; 3) and to propose genuinely and explicitly ‘politicised’ conceptions of evil in response to those seemingly depoliticized versions.

As I stated above, independent of the context in which today’s political discourses employ it, twentieth century has produced an extensive and effectual literature on evil, and this literature constitutes of various critical approaches. But I maintain that, in order to accomplish the above mentioned three critical tasks, the method that has to be employed must above all emphasize the truly political nature of evil, and also that contemporary critical approaches to evil have, until recently, usually missed this point. Therefore a refurbished critical stance is necessary for these three tasks.

In this study, I will first reconstruct a generic discussion within the contemporary critical approaches to evil by presenting two radical and opposing conceptions of evil that I take to be representative of an early critical position. While one of these conceptions sublimates, and the other demystifies, both of them depoliticize evil. After that I show how the above mentioned three tasks are accomplished in today’s philosophical circles with a refurbished critical standing.

In the following chapters, I first pick up one of the most original contemporary approaches to evil, i.e., Georges Bataille’s literary analyses which, focusing on the function of evil in literary texts by eight authors, assume that evil is human and deserves a humane treatment in literature. In contrast to Bataille’s sublimation of evil, I present Hannah Arendt’s ideas about banality of evil. By critically rereading the narratives and poems of Emily Brontë and William Blake, Sade and Baudelaire that Bataille uses in *Literature and Evil*<sup>9</sup> through Arendt’s emphasis of banality, I

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<sup>9</sup> Georges Bataille, *Literature and Evil*, translated by Alastair Hamilton, Marion Boyars, 2001.

reconstruct a ‘debate’ between the two representative critical approaches, i.e., the debate between those who conceive evil in terms of sublimity and those who conceive it in terms of banality. Then I show how both approaches lack today’s necessary political emphasis; although both Bataille and Arendt begin their inquiries from utterly political positions, they both tend to define a ‘depolitical’, almost ‘natural’ conception of evil that requires the ‘othering’ of evil, and consequently, their positions remain within ‘supposedly depoliticised’ domains. After that, to arrive at the politicizing of evil, I sketch out Slavoj Zizek’s and Alain Badiou’s joint attempt to criticise post-modern acts of violence. And finally, I again read a narrative – *Irreversible*, the film by Gaspar Noe of 2002 – through Slavoj Zizek’s perspectives on evil to show how with Zizek we can accomplish the task of proposing explicitly ‘politicised’ conceptions of evil in response to its supposedly depoliticized versions.

With the discussions I reconstruct and the critical methods I employ including literary and film criticism, I aim at emphasizing the *subjectivity* of evil-reception, and in a certain sense, with reference to subjectivity of evil-reception, *objectifying* the evil.<sup>10</sup> Such an objectification either points out a *universal* evil inherent in all parties (in both humanitarian projects and acts of pure violence, in both stealing and claiming right, in both raping and philosophizing) or reduces today’s different kinds of evil-oriented ethics to a ‘genuine nihilism’,<sup>11</sup> which logically is nothing but the ‘janus face’ of the former argument, as that which is inherent in all cannot provide with any criteria for objective differentiation or definition. This, I maintain, is the best response

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<sup>10</sup> Theodor Adorno, *Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Rodney Livingstone, Polity Press, 2001.

Thanks to Adorno, now we can realize when one turns to subjectivity one goes somewhere else through subjectivity.

<sup>11</sup> Alain Badiou, *Ethics, An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, p. 3.



to the evil that is ‘being used as a political tool to obscure complex issues, to block genuine thinking, and to stifle public discussion and debate’.

## 2. Mystifying Evil

In *Literature and Evil*, Bataille attempts ‘to extract the essence of literature’, and for him ‘[l]iterature is either the essential or nothing.’ The eight authors he deals with are those who move him most on account of the purity with which evil is presented in their work – for instance, Blake’s achievement is ‘to reduce humanity to poetry and poetry to Evil’, and thus to raise his ‘poems and (...) violently coloured figures to a sublime level,’ he commends.<sup>12</sup>

For him, humanity pursues two goals: the one to preserve life, and the other to increase the intensity of life, an intensity which ‘varies according to the greater or the lesser liberty.’ These are the impulses that we have named good and evil, and they are and must remain opposed, yet both of them constitute a form of *value*. Value by its nature wants us to go ‘as far as possible’, its association with the principle of good represents the point beyond which constituted society cannot advance, its association with evil the ‘farthest point that individuals or minorities can temporarily reach.’<sup>13</sup>

Bataille sometimes claims not to privilege one form of value over the other, yet given his equation of liberty and evil, he in fact does so when he asserts: ‘The heart is human to the extent that it rebels (this means: to be a man is not to bow down

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<sup>12</sup> *Literature and Evil*, Chapter 4 ‘William Blake’, pp. 79-80.

<sup>13</sup> *Literature and Evil*, Chapter 3 ‘Michelet’, p. 74.

before the law).<sup>14</sup> With reference to Baudelaire, Bataille claims that this rebellion is not the result of the will, which can only desire good, but of *fascination*, which is the contrary of, and the destruction of the will. He adds to this that it is towards ‘a perfect silence of the will’ that poetry is now tending.<sup>15</sup>

In Bataille’s work the connection between poetry and evil is further elaborated in terms of temporality and economy. While good is associated with care for the future, with the anxious working and saving of the bourgeois classes, the intensity of evil is that of the present moment. As such, it has an intimate relationship with poetry, which, like primitive magic, operates and has its meaning in the present.

Poetry also seeks to go beyond the limits as its intensity dissolves the subject-object relationship and ‘destroys the objects which it seizes’. This destruction should be related to another concept essential to Bataille’s conception of evil: that of *potlatch*. *Potlatch* is a form of sacrifice carried out by American Indian societies in which goods are ritually destroyed or slaves slaughtered as a means of impressing rivals. It is a prodigal squandering of wealth which, in destroying it, actualises its essence. Bataille associates it with the conspicuous consumption of the aristocracy, but sees ‘the real *potlatch* of our times’ in the poverty-stricken ‘individual who lies down and scoffs’;<sup>16</sup> in short, with anyone who rejects the values of bourgeois economy.

The impulse towards *potlatch* – the casting forth and voiding of substance, is only one form of what Bataille celebrates through *heterology* – the science of what is completely other. In the essay ‘The Use-Value of D.-A.-F. De Sade’, Bataille divides

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<sup>14</sup> *The Impossible*, translated by Robert Hurley, City Lights, 1991, pp. 147-164, in *The Bataille Reader*, p. 108.

<sup>15</sup> *Literature and Evil*, Chapter 2, Baudelaire, p. 57; p. 59.

<sup>16</sup> ‘The Gift of Rivalry: ‘Potlatch’, *The Bataille Reader*, p. 208.

human impulses into those of appropriation and excretion (which are roughly analogous to the polarisation of good and evil presented in the essay on Baudelaire). Appropriation is the urge leading to the creation of a homogeneous society; science and philosophy are its most advanced manifestations. Collective excremental impulses exist not only as sexual activity and the scatological but as laughter, ecstatic trance, poetry and religion. God and excrement, the sacred and the soiled are identical in nature from the psychological point of view, as they are in primitive religions. Perhaps needless to say, Bataille is never more content than when the two are brought together in sacrilege: hence his admiration for Sade and his hundred and twenty things to do with body fluids and eucharistic wafers. He also asserts that it is only through a practical heterology that revolution is possible:

Without a profound complicity of natural forces such as violent death, gushing blood, sudden catastrophes, and the horrible cries of pain that accompany them (...) the fall into stinking filth of what had been elevated – without a sadistic understanding of an incontestably thundering and torrential nature, there could be no revolutionaries, there could only be a revolting Utopian sentimentality.<sup>17</sup>

Finally, for Bataille, evil is ultimately *communication*: following the existentialist interpretation of Sade by Simone de Beauvoir<sup>18</sup> he sees even the relationship between torturer and victim as an attempt by the torturer to break out of isolation. He describes the crucifixion of Christ with the words:

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<sup>17</sup> ‘The Use-Value of D.A.F. de Sade (An Open Letter to My Current Comrades), in *The Bataille Reader*, p. 157.

<sup>18</sup> In ‘*Faut-il brûler Sade?*’ originally published in the December 1951 and January 1952 issues of *les Temps Modernes*, English translation by Annette Michelson in *The Marquis de Sade The One Hundred and Twenty Days of Sodom*, compiled and translated by Austryn Wainhouse and Richard Seaver, Arrow Books, 1990, pp. 3-64, cf. especially pp. 60-61.

A night of death wherein Creator and creatures bleed together and lacerated each other and on all sides, were challenged at the extreme limits of shame: that is what is required for their communion.

Thus 'communication' without which nothing exists for us, is guaranteed by crime. 'Communication' is love and taints those whom it unites.(...) So clearly the communication of human beings is guaranteed by evil.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> *On Nietzsche*, translated by Bruce Boone, Paragon House, 1992, in *The Bataille Reader*, p. 93.

### 3. De-mystifying Evil

If Bataille insists that evil is human and deserves a humane treatment in literature; Arendt reminds us that it is also all-too-human. Her account of it is almost completely the antithesis of Bataille's. For her the quintessence of evil is expressed in the person of Adolf Eichmann, the bureaucrat responsible for sending millions of Jews to their deaths in the concentration camps and for carrying out this task 'with great zeal and the most meticulous care.'<sup>20</sup> Her description of his trial for these crimes shows a character so far removed from sublimity that it can be used to demonstrate that 'the horrible can be not only ludicrous but outright funny.'<sup>21</sup> He was 'not a monster, but it was difficult indeed not to suspect that he was a clown.'<sup>22</sup>

Eichmann is everything that Bataille's conception of evil is not: he is bourgeois (not even petty bourgeois, but even worse, downwardly mobile into the lower-middle class); he is conformist and career-minded. He joins the SS because his dad failed as a travelling salesman for the Vacuum Oil Company, and he asked himself 'why not?'<sup>23</sup> – it seemed like a good move at the time. Arendt accepts Eichmann's account of his own actions: that he did not act out of sadism or hatred,

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<sup>20</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, Revised and enlarged edition, Penguin, 1965, 1994, p. 25.

<sup>21</sup> *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, p. 48.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29; p. 33.

and that he felt that '[h]ad he been made commander of a death-camp, he would have had to commit suicide, since he was incapable of killing.'<sup>24</sup> Yet he is equally incapable of guilt or remorse, having no real sense of good and evil detached from the laws imposed by the state at a given time, and defending his actions as 'the duties of a law-abiding citizen.'<sup>25</sup> Instead of pitying his victims, he laments over himself as a hard-luck story. He is so attached to the homogeneous that he risks recapture after his escape to Argentina by failing to fully conceal his identity and partially continuing to use his real name.<sup>26</sup> Above all, he is incapable of true communication; he himself admits: 'Officialese (Amtsprache) is my only language' and Arendt describes him as:

(...) genuinely incapable of uttering a single sentence that was not a cliché  
 (...) his inability to speak was closely connected with the inability to think,  
 namely, to think from the standpoint of somebody else. No communication  
 was possible with him, not because he lied, but because he was surrounded  
 by the most reliable of safeguards against reality.<sup>27</sup>  
 That is, by the clichés which comfort him and make him feel 'elated'.<sup>28</sup>

If Eichmann's banality is partly the result of his narrow self-interest, Arendt also demonstrates that the thoughtlessness created by National Socialism does not create sublimity even when it makes people indifferent to their own lives. She retells the story of a German doctor dealing with wounded soldiers in Königsberg as the Red Army approaches. He is accosted by a woman 'who showed him a varicose vein she had had for years but which she wanted to have treated now, because she had time'. He tries to convince her that it is more important to escape from the Red Army, but she is unperturbed, saying 'The Russians will never get us. The Führer will never

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<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 92.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 135.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 237-238.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 48-49.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 252.

permit it. Much sooner he will gas us.' Nobody seems to find her attitude out of the ordinary. Arendt comments that to complete the story: 'There should have been one more voice, preferably a female one, which sighing heavily, replied: And now all that good, expensive gas has been wasted on the Jews!'"<sup>29</sup> One might add that the story would not have been quite so much of a black comedy if it had happened anywhere but in Königsberg: Kant might well have found in the woman with the varicose vein a third thing to fill the mind with ever-increasing awe and admiration.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, extreme banality has almost the same effect upon us as the sublime: to quote Arendt's closing words, it is 'fearsome, word-and-thought-defying'.<sup>31</sup>

Although Arendt herself does not construct a literary theory on the basis of her understanding of evil, she speaks for and has partly inspired a tendency in literature and criticism which aims to demystify evil, to strip it of its fascination. It was doubtless under the influence of Arendt that her friend Mary McCarthy decided to reinvent Macbeth as a superstitious golfer. W. H. Auden, who corresponded with and had a mutual admiration with Arendt is very close to her on this point and anticipates some of the insights in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* in his poems of the late 30s and early 40s. In March 1939, he wrote a poem on Herman Melville, which, dismissing the myth of the white whale in *Moby Dick* as 'intricate and false', asserts: 'Evil is unspectacular and always human / And shares our bed and eats at our own table'.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 110-111.

<sup>30</sup> A further piece of black comedy is furnished by the fact that Eichmann at one point 'suddenly declared with great emphasis that he had lived his whole life according to Kant's moral precepts, and especially according to a Kantian notion of duty.' Arendt's interpretation is that he had in fact unconsciously distorted this to what Hans Frans called 'the categorical imperative in the Third Reich: "Act in such a way that the Führer, if he knew your action, would approve it."' (*Eichmann in Jerusalem*, pp. 135-136).

<sup>31</sup> *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, p. 252.

<sup>32</sup> W. H. Auden, *Collected Poems*, ed Edward Mendelson, Faber and Faber, 1976, p. 200.



Auden also goes further than Arendt in showing the banality of evil in more varied forms. His ballad-tales in light verse show little men with delusions of grandeur almost accidentally turning into the perpetrators of horrific crime; Victor, a mousy and repressed clerk, murders his wife when he discovers she is unfaithful and ends up in a lunatic asylum, ‘making a woman of clay’; saying: ‘I am Alpha and Omega, I shall come, to judge the world some day’.<sup>33</sup> He is certainly given over to the heterological in these religious transports, especially if we make a Freudian interpretation of the clay as excrement, but there is nothing sublime about him: he is merely a sad case. In another ballad, James Honeyman, a narrowly ambitious scientist, is so disappointed since he cannot interest the Ministry of Defence in the toxic gas he had invented that he sells it to the enemy instead, causing the deaths of himself and his family.<sup>34</sup> He is, I would claim, the type of the philosopher who falls down a well *without even looking at the stars as his excuse*; Arendt would have done well to bear his banality in mind when she apologised for the ‘thoughtlessness’ of Heidegger in collaborating with the Nazis.

However, perhaps the best example of the banality of evil in Auden’s work is the character of Herod in his Christmas Oratorio ‘For the Time Being’. This character bears more than a passing resemblance to Eichmann in lamenting over himself for being put in such an unpleasant position, when he is about to authorise the Massacre of the Innocents:

I’ve worked like a slave (...) I read all the official dispatches without skipping. I’ve taken elocution lessons. I’ve hardly ever taken bribes (...) I’ve

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<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 141.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 134-138.

tried to be good. I brush my teeth every night. I haven't had sex for a month. I object. I'm a liberal.<sup>35</sup>

Such examples – and one could give many more – might be used to refute Bataille's view of literature's necessary or essential complicity with evil: but might we not say that this is a debate between those who conceive evil in terms of sublimity and those who conceive it in terms of banality, and simply conclude that there are two ways of representing evil in literature – evil as sublime and evil as banal – and that Bataille has the free to use the illustrations he prefers? The matter is, I think, a bit more complex.

Bataille confesses: 'I approach poetry: only to miss it.'<sup>36</sup> Let us take him at his word and look at what he has missed – deliberately or otherwise – in his analyses of the poetry of Emily Brontë and William Blake. Bataille interprets these authors in terms of *heterological sublimity*: that is, in terms of the fascination of death, violence, revolution and excrement. I do not wish to claim that these insights are completely invalid, but I hope to demonstrate that they depend on a violent decontextualisation and also to suggest that there is a very real sense in which Blake and Brontë do *not* belong in the same category of the hero of *Literature and Evil*'s another chapter, the Marquis de Sade. I shall do this by considering the question of banality in these three authors.

For Bataille, *Wuthering Heights* is, 'if we accept the sadistic form of vice', the book in which Evil 'has reached its most perfect form.'<sup>37</sup> This is because it 'raises the question of Evil with regard to passion, as if Evil were the most powerful means of

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<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 304.

<sup>36</sup> From 'To be Orestes' in part 3 of *The Impossible*, in *The Bataille Reader*, p. 109.

<sup>37</sup> *Literature and Evil*, p. 17.

exposing passion.’ The trouble with his account is that it reduces Heathcliff and Catherine Earnshaw to mythical figures, and the novel form to that of the romance or tale. Heathcliff, he says, ‘represents a very basic state – that of the child in revolt against the world of Good (...) committed, in his revolt, to the side of Evil’ – whilst, strange enough, he thinks Catherine is an ‘absolutely moral character’ who suffers a drama of ‘transgression and atonement’.<sup>38</sup> What is missing in the account is the counterbalance given by the perspective of Nelly Dean, who sees a kind of banality in passion and points out the childish rather than child-like quality of Catherine’s ‘senseless, wicked rages’.<sup>39</sup> Also missing is the way in which Heathcliff alternates between sublimity and banality, one aspect of this being, in Bataille’s own terminology, an oscillation between the ecstasies of the heterogeneous and the desire for appropriation. Shortly before dying he wishes that he could annihilate his property from the face of the earth in what we might interpret as a kind of *potlatch*,<sup>40</sup> yet for most of his life he is obsessed with accumulating money – and not only for the purposes of revenge; he is ‘*near*’ and a ‘cruel, hard landlord to his tenants’,<sup>41</sup> and even before the death of Catherine, ‘avarice is growing with him a besetting sin.’<sup>42</sup> The political aspect of Bataille’s attitude to childhood and to present time in his interpretation of *Wuthering Heights* is also worth mentioning. For him, the novel is ultimately a glorification of the world of childhood, of childhood seen as sublime rebellion:

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<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21; p. 22.

<sup>39</sup> Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, Penguin, 1994, p. 110.

<sup>40</sup> *Wuthering Heights*, p. 275.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 172.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98.

The lesson of *Wuthering Heights*, of Greek tragedy, and ultimately of all religions, is that there is an instinctive tendency towards divine intoxication which the rational world of calculation cannot bear (...) Divine intoxication, to which the instincts of childhood are so closely related, is entirely in the present.<sup>43</sup>

*Wuthering Heights* does indeed give us a vision of a childhood realm of racing wildly on the heath, in which the love (or family romance) of Catherine and Heathcliff originates. But it also gives us painfully repulsive picture of childish banality and selfishness, especially in the character of Linton Heathcliff. While the childhood of Catherine and Heathcliff is chiefly one of resistance to tyranny, that of Heathcliff's son is one of more-or-less abject submission and revenge on those weaker than himself: he will 'undertake to torture any number of cats, if their teeth be drawn and their claws pared.'<sup>44</sup> Moreover, living entirely in the present, is also, as Orwell and Kundera have shown, one of the symptoms of submission to totalitarianism, of societies reduced to a sinister childishness. This fact manifests itself in Heathcliff's household as microcosm of a totalitarian state: most clearly in the scene where Linton Heathcliff sucks on a piece of sugar candy, contented in a temporary respite from his own tortures, and indifferent to the sufferings of his bride Cathy as long as they are out of his sight and hearing.<sup>45</sup>

Bataille supports his interpretation of *Wuthering Heights* by quoting Brontë's poetry in such a way as to make it fit in with his preoccupations, taking good care to remove any residue of conventional morality. Thus the lines from *The Prisoner* 'Yet I would lose no sting, would wish no torture less / The more that anguish racks the earlier it will bless' might as well have been uttered by Bataille's Simone, who in the

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<sup>43</sup> *Literature and Evil*, p. 22.

<sup>44</sup> *Wuthering Heights*, p. 231.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 234-235.

outlined sequel to the *Story of the Eye* is beaten to death in a torture camp and ‘dies as though making love’<sup>46</sup> – what is censored is the way in which Brontë’s poem ends with a reference to the torture as ‘A sentence, unapproved, and overruled by heaven’.<sup>47</sup> It is as if Bataille fears/flees/gets anxious from the possibility that a sublime moment might be associated with the morally good.

A similar decontextualisation occurs when Bataille quotes Blake. Naturally he focuses on lines describing ‘the sexual act in as far as it is the sacrilegious transgression of a taboo’,<sup>48</sup> i.e. the poem ‘I saw a chapel all of gold...’ in which a phallic serpent forces its slimy length into a chapel and vomits its poison out on the bread and the wine. Bataille’s interpretation is undoubtedly correct on a basic level: scarcely anyone today would seek to deny that the poem is describing the sexual act. Yet when Bataille describes the poem as Blake expressing ‘that burst of energy, the violence, which he believed Evil to be’<sup>49</sup> it seems to me that he is assimilating the poem too easily to his own delight in the sacrilegious, in obscenity *qua* obscenity. If we attempt to reconstruct what this poem may have meant to Bataille through a knowledge of his own *oeuvre*, we see superimposed upon in the hapless priest in *Story of the Eye* forced to ejaculate on the ciborium before being murdered<sup>50</sup> and, as the poem ends with the words ‘So I turn’d into a sty / And laid me down among the swine’, we see Sir Edmund and Simone tossing themselves off outside a pigsty with a ‘luscious streetwalker’ imprisoned inside, wearing only cami-knickers, collapsed in a

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<sup>46</sup> ‘Outline of a Sequel to *Story of the Eye*’ in Georges Bataille, *Story of the Eye*, translated by Joachim Neugroschal, Penguin, 1979, 1982, p. 79.

<sup>47</sup> ‘The Prisoner’, *The Works of the Brontë Sisters*, with an introduction by Kathryn White, Wordsworth editions, 1995, p. 68.

<sup>48</sup> *Literature and Evil*, p. 20.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 92.

<sup>50</sup> *Story of the Eye*, p. 62.

pool of liquid manure.<sup>51</sup> What is completely lost is Blake's implication that sexuality shouldn't really be like this!

Bataille's essay closes with an extract from what he calls an 'incomparable poem' which is presented as a 'faithful image' of Blake's 'incongruous liberty' and 'festive turbulence'.<sup>52</sup> The poem is Blake's riposte to Klopstock, who had criticised the coarse and scatological elements in English poetry. Let me quote the passage in full:

When Klopstock England defied,  
Uprose William Blake in his pride;  
For old Nobodaddy aloft  
Farted and belched and cough'd;  
Then swore a great oath that made heaven quake,  
And call'd aloud to English Blake.  
Blake was giving his body ease  
At Lambeth beneath the poplar trees.  
From his seat then started he,  
And turn'd him round three times three.  
The Moon at that sight blush'd scarlet red,  
The stars threw down their cups& fled.

Seen from Bataille's perspective this amounts to a violent celebration of scatology which raises the excremental to the very stars which it obliterates. Ending the poem at this point invites us to take it straight – to assimilate it to the moment in *Jerusalem* where 'the starry heavens are fled from the might limbs of Albion'.<sup>53</sup> Blake ends the poem in another way. Having duly punished Klopstock by twisting his bowels and then pitifully untwisting them, he concludes:

If Blake could do this when he rose up from shite

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<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46-47.

<sup>52</sup> *Literature and Evil*, p. 97.

<sup>53</sup> William Blake, *The Complete Poems*, ed. W. H. Stevenson, Longman, 1971, 185, p. 792.

What might he not do if he sat down to write?<sup>54</sup>

It is a shame that Bataille omitted these lines, since they make two things clear: first, that for Blake at least, there actually is a clear distinction between writing and shite-ing. The second is that this poem is supposed to be funny: it belongs to the satirical tradition. The target of the satire is not only Klopstock, but Nobodaddy, symbol of jealousy, repression and authority. The lines referring to him first occur in a poem from Blake's notebook which begins like this:

Let the brothels of Paris be opened,  
With many an alluring dance  
To awake the physicians through the city  
Said the beautiful Queen of France.

Then old Nobodaddy aloft  
Farted and belched and coughed  
And said 'I love hanging and drawing and quartering  
Every bit as well as war and slaughtering'.<sup>55</sup>

We have here a concentrated attack on the violence of authority and its complicity with imagined forms of sexual freedom, which shows us the extent to which Bataille's heterological reading oversimplifies Blake by equating his Revolutionary sympathies with a blanket validation of violence, or even of the sexual.

Perhaps I am unfair to Bataille in focusing on his excisions: all quotation is violence – leading to the apologetic: *I have had to cut him in order to use him*,<sup>56</sup> and I am of course cutting and using in my turn. However, what is missing in his account is not only certain aspects of Blake, but an awareness of how in the scatological British

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<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 468.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 168.

<sup>56</sup> Cf. Bataille on Sartre, *Literature and Evil*, Chapter 3 'Baudelaire', p. 41.

tradition that had inspired Klopstock's disgust, *the heterological functions as critique*. In the words of Camille Paglia, to piss on is to criticise.<sup>57</sup> This is either done through the fantasy of voiding one's own body fluids, as Byron invites us to do upon the grave of Castlereagh,<sup>58</sup> or by revealing the banality of the satirised by showing them in the act of excretion or wallowing in their own excremental matter: this is why Nobodaddy farts and belches and coughs. The obvious examples of this tradition are Rochester and Swift.

However, I would like to take Pope's portrait of Lord Hervey as Sporus in the 'Epistle to Arbuthnot' as the supreme example of the deployment of *heterological banality* in satire. Sporus, like Eichmann, is a man lacking real character, who adapts himself to the moment, at home in any element: an 'Amphibious thing'.<sup>59</sup> As Paglia points out in her brilliant account of the court hermaphrodite, Sporus is a type who is always with us: he is in governments, corporations – and university departments. He invites scatological insult ('a brown nose, an ass-licker') because 'sycophancy is political sodomy' and 'shameless self-abasement is unmanly, elevating bum over head.'<sup>60</sup> In Pope's sublime indictment of banality, Sporus is reduced to his own body fluids (and perhaps also the body fluids he has received). He is a 'mere white curd of

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<sup>57</sup> Camille Paglia, *Sexual Personae. Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson*, Vintage Books, 1990, p. 21.

<sup>58</sup> 'Epitaph:

Posterity will ne'er survey

A nobler grave than this

Here lie the bones of Castlereagh:

Stop, traveller'

In *Byron Poetical Works*, ed. Frederick Page, Oxford University Press, 1970, 1989, p. 21.

<sup>59</sup> 'Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot', *Pope Poetical Works*, ed. Herbert Davis, Oxford University Press, 1966, 1985, p. 337.

<sup>60</sup> *Sexual Personae*, p. 143.



Ass's milk' who 'spits himself abroad':<sup>61</sup> his essence is nothing but what he projects out of himself,<sup>62</sup> and this is 'Half froth, half venom' – evil and banal triviality in equal measure. Appropriately enough, in this he approximates to the human condition as theorised by Sade in *Juliect*, where man is described in his relation to Nature as 'the froth, the vapor which rises from the rarified liquid in a heated vessel' whose essence is to be 'resultant (...) heterogeneous.'<sup>63</sup>

Let me return to Sade and Bataille's comments on him in *Literature and Evil*. I argue that what distinguishes Sade from Blake and Brontë is that his writings, particularly *The One Hundred and Twenty Days of Sodom* present us banality with scarcely any hint of critique. Bataille recognises this when he says that 'Boredom seeps from the monstrosity of Sade's work', yet he tries to present this very banality in terms of sublimity, in the same way that Burke finds sublimity in monotonous natural landscapes:<sup>64</sup> 'Interminable and monotonous enumeration alone managed to present him with the void, the desert, for which he yearned.'<sup>65</sup> This is to miss the point, though Sade's content certainly attains its true form when the text lapses into a draft version with no artifice to relieve the endless iteration of tortures. The point is rather the irredeemably base nature of the villains themselves. As a historical figure,

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<sup>61</sup> *Pope Poetical Works*, p. 356.

<sup>62</sup> Byron's presentation of Castlereagh as the eunuch Eutropius has distinct similarities: Castlereagh is also sublimely banal or 'Ineffably – legitimately vile' and he is 'Emasculated to the marrow It'; the excision of his masculinity has become his essence. (*Don Juan*, Canto I, l. 98; l. 114, *Byron Poetical Works*, pp. 636-637).

<sup>63</sup> Quoted by Simone de Beauvoir in 'Must we burn Sade?' translated by annette Michelson, in *The One Hundred and Twenty Days of Sodom*, p. 45.

<sup>64</sup> *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas on the Sublime and Beautiful*, ed. Adam Phillips, Oxford University Press, 1990, Part II, Section IX, pp. 6869; Part IV, Section XIII, pp. 128-129.

<sup>65</sup> *Literature and Evil*, p. 116.

Sade might *seem* to represent the antithesis of Eichmann. Whilst the latter murdered through paperwork and claimed to be squeamish about the act of killing, Sade refused the opportunity of condemning people to death under the Terror, claiming that one might kill for pleasure but not in the name of Justice.<sup>66</sup> Yet the contrast between bureaucrat and Sadean aristocratic debauchee is not actually so big. Indeed, one of the few redeeming features of Sade's work is that it corrects the tendency in Arendt – and perhaps in some public intellectuals of our time – to see banality as quintessentially lower middle class. If we look at Sade's aristocratic villains one of their most striking aspects is their small-mindedness; their strange economies among their heterological excess. Characteristically, before the final massacre at Silling, they draw up a list of victims, but decide 'to spare the cooks, because of their considerable talents'.<sup>67</sup> The final pages of *The Hundred and Twenty Days of Sodom* might have been placed there to convince us that evil is not essentially sublime or banal, and that the sublimity in the works of Brontë and Blake has its origin elsewhere.

Thus Sade gives us a clue about how to view the debate between sublimity and banality of evil. As exemplified by their secret mutual conviction that banality is quintessentially lower middle class, both Bataille and Arendt have some implicit political claims apart from the visible ones, and this is enough to suspect their critical methods.

But let me put this aside for now, as since Plato, philosopher is the one who breaks off the consensus<sup>68</sup> and it is clear that whatever implicit claims they may have,

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<sup>66</sup> Cf. 'Must we burn Sade?' in *The one Hundred and Twenty Days of Sodom*, pp. 15-16. De Beauvoir comments: 'He approves of the vendetta, but not of the courts. We may kill, but we may not judge.' (Ibid., p. 61.)

<sup>67</sup> *The One Hundred and Twenty Days of Sodom*, p. 670.

<sup>68</sup> Alain Badiou, "A Highly Speculative Reasoning on Democracy", *Cogito* 43, ed. E. Efe Çakmak, p. 29, YKY, 2005.

Bataille's and Arendt's explicit political claims on evil employ critical methods to break off the consensus. But -- to turn to the main point of this study -- in breaking off the consensus they do not point out the subjectivity of evil-reception, on the contrary they both pretend to have depoliticised views on a certain, almost natural evil, and both tend to put forward some characteristics of this definitive evil. While subjectivity of evil-reception demands us to 'locate both good and evil in the very structure of human subjectivity, agency, and freedom', both Bataille and Arendt search for an absolute evil, and always 'elsewhere', either by mystifying or demystifying its contents.

So although their inquiries set sail from utterly political positions, they both end up offering a 'depolitical' conception of evil, as if evil can serve as criteria for some kind of objective, almost natural differentiation or definition, some kind of an a priori 'othering'. That is to say, the critical methods they employ lack the necessary tools we need today to oppose the consensus.

#### 4. Politicizing Evil

In their attempt to undermine the political ideals of our times, both Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek rearticulate the spirit of the 1960s with an emphasis on Lacan. While Badiou focuses on the understanding of and the attitudes towards evil, Žižek introduces an original perspective on postmodern violence that enables us to identify a threefold psychic formula of Evil; and both philosophers seek for a revival of politics proper in their joined attempt to uncover the hypocrisy of humanitarian compassion. Their debate on evil and human rights is quite stimulating; while Badiou and Žižek have been striving for a new and more relevant formulation of the political with reference to psychoanalysis, the philosophers of the ‘post-political’ era, i.e. the era where there is no room for politics proper, have kept on searching for the roots of the opposition to the liberal political culture. It is especially Badiou who, with reference to 60’s, opposes the neoliberal depictions of good and evil.

Alain Badiou’s efforts to recall the spirit of the 60s could be seen in his pamphlet on ethics<sup>69</sup> – an analysis, critique, and reformulation of the discourse of evil in contemporary thought – where he refers first to Foucault who declared that ‘man, in the sense of constituent subject, is a constructed historical concept peculiar to a certain order of discourse, and not a timeless self-evident principle capable of

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<sup>69</sup> Alain Badiou, *Ethics, An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*.

founding human rights or a universal ethics', then to Althusser who, through his particular science of 'historical materialism', argued that human rights and ethics in the abstract sense were nothing but ideologies, and finally to Lacan who, by distinguishing Ego from the subject, concluded that there existed no norm to ground the idea of a human subject (a norm through which a universal morality could be articulated). Badiou maintains that, contemporary political philosophy (or in Žižek's terms, the pseudo-political philosophy of the postpolitical era)<sup>70</sup> is a betrayal against the spirit of the 60s, because today, intellectuals, having rediscovered the virtues of humanitarian individualism and liberal defence of rights, have already been 'won over to the logic of a capitalist economy and a parliamentary democracy.' Rejecting both the theological and the scientific (psychological, sociological, etc.) interpretations of evil, Badiou locates good and evil in the very structure of human subjectivity, agency, and freedom, and argues that in our philosophical and political discourses today, evil is 'self-evident,' and that both this 'self-evidence' and this conception of evil are problematic:

The idea of the self-evidence of evil is not, in our society, very old. It dates, in my opinion, from the end of the 1960s, when the big political movement of the 60s was finished (...) Today we see liberal capitalism and its political system, parliamentarianism, as the only natural and acceptable solutions. Every revolutionary idea is considered utopian and ultimately criminal. We are made to believe that the global spread of capitalism and what gets called "democracy" is the dream of all humanity. And also that the whole world wants the authority of the American Empire, and its military police, NATO (...) In truth, our leaders and propagandists know very well that liberal capitalism is an inegalitarian regime, unjust, and unacceptable for the vast majority of humanity. And they know too that our "democracy" is an illusion.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> See Slavoj Žižek, "A Leftist Plea for Eurocentrism", in *Unpacking Europe*, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen Rotterdam – NAI Publishers, 2001, pp. 112-130.

<sup>71</sup> Christopher Cox and Molly Whalen, "On Evil: An Interview with Alain Badiou".

Certainly Badiou and Žižek are not the first philosophers to rise up against the apparently depoliticised ‘humanitarian compassion’ of human rights defenders, there had always been resistance against the so called humanism of human rights policies even before Foucault, Althusser, and Lacan, coming from a variety of world-views. Indeed, Badiou and Žižek’s emphasis on the concept of ‘the political’ as it relates to good and evil recalls that of Carl Schmitt who had a critical view of the post-war ‘humanitarian’ judgements on Nazi Germany. At this point, referring to Jürgen Habermas’ discussion of Schmittian conception of the political can prove useful, as this appeal will help us first to differentiate Schmitt’s stance from Žižek’s, and then to compare and contrast Žižek’s conception of the political with Jürgen Habermas’, who is certainly among those philosophers Badiou would describe as: ‘intellectuals who, having rediscovered the virtues of humanitarian individualism and liberal defence of rights, have already been won over to the logic of a capitalist economy and (...) a parliamentary democracy.’

In his attempt to rearticulate the Kantian idea of perpetual peace with the benefit of two hundred years’ hindsight, Jürgen Habermas compassionately defends the multicultural realm of equal rights, and focuses on Carl Schmitt’s conception of the political and human rights – his rivals in this discussion would be, to name a few, Jacques Rancière, Étienne Balibar, Alain Badiou or Slavoj Žižek; or even Foucault, Althusser and maybe even Lacan. But if we may, for the time being give voice to Carl Schmitt as a sign of the poverty of a certain juridic tradition:

We speak of the main city cemetery and tactfully keep quiet about the slaughter house. But slaughtering is self-evident, and it would be inhumane, even bestial, to say the word “to slaughter” out loud.<sup>72</sup>

According to Schmitt, ‘the deception of humanism has its roots in the hypocrisy of a legal pacifism that wants to conduct “just wars” in the name of peace and cosmopolitan rights.’<sup>73</sup> And in fact, with his reference to hypocrisy, Schmitt comes close to Hegel’s critique of Kant who, as Badiou remarks with rather a superficial comment,<sup>74</sup> is the key figure for all ideologies of human rights. Schmitt argues that the humanitarian morality, the global fight in the name of human rights against Evil, is deeply rooted in a serious misconception of politics, i.e. it excludes the possibility of a concept of the foe.<sup>75</sup> In the absence of the friend and the foe, the only categories left behind are those of morality – good and evil –, which we apply to our political conflicts. Hence, we regard our political rival as ‘an inhuman monster’ who has to be exterminated. As an alternative to the cosmopolitan pacification of nations, Schmitt seems to propose a return to limited wars – and this, for him, is exactly what we need if we take into account the true ‘essence of the politic.’<sup>76</sup> Habermas focuses on Schmitt, but, as expected, he goes further to say that the basic and common mistake of the strong objection against the universalism of cosmopolitan rights – as this objected universalism rests upon the conception of Man as a constituent Subject – is to miss the distinction between morality and law. He continues in the following pages of his essay: ‘Independent of the context in which Schmitt employs it, this

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<sup>72</sup> Jürgen Habermas, “Kant’s Idea of Perpetual Peace with the Benefit of Two Hundred Years’ Hindsight”, in *Perpetual Peace: Essays on Kant’s Cosmopolitan Ideal* Bohman, eds. James & M. Lutz-Bachmann, MIT Press, 1997, p. 145.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid. p. 136.

<sup>74</sup> Badiou, *Ethics, An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, p. 8.

<sup>75</sup> Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, New Brunswick, 1976, p. 54ff.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

critique of morality has had baneful effects through the history of its reception.<sup>77</sup>

According to Habermas, only *unmediated* moralization of law and politics could result in the abolishment of the political sphere, which, of course, brings us to the question of politics proper.

Zizek has responses to both. In his ‘A Leftist Plea for Eurocentrism’ he refers to Jacques Rancière’s assessment about the disavowals of politics in ‘the entire history of European political thought’,<sup>78</sup> who identified four main versions of this disavowal, one of which is *Parapolitics* of Habermas, and the other *Ultrapolitics* of Schmitt:

*Arche-politics*: the ‘communitarian’ attempt to define a traditional, close, organically structured, homogeneous social scape that allows for no void in which the political moment or event can emerge. (...)

*Parapolitics*: the attempt to depoliticize politics. [In para-politics] one accepts the political conflict but reformulates it into a competition, within the representational space, between acknowledged parties/agents for the (temporary) occupation of the place of executive power. This para-politics, of course, has a series of different successive versions: (the main rupture is that between its classical formulation and its modern Hobbesian version which focuses on the problematic of social contract, of the alienation of individual rights in the emergence of sovereign power. Habermasian or Rawlsian ethics are perhaps the last philosophical vestiges of this attitude: the attempt to de-agonize politics by way of formulating clear rules to be obeyed so that the agonistic procedure of litigation does not explode into politics proper.

The Marxist (or Utopian socialist) *metapolitics*: political conflict is fully asserted, *but* as a shadow theater in which events whose proper place is in another scene (that of economic process) are played out. (...)

The *ultrapolitics* of Carl Schmitt: the attempt to depoliticize the conflict by way of bringing it to extremes, via the direct militarization of politics. In ultrapolitics, the repressed political returns in the guise of the attempt to resolve the deadlock of the political conflict by its false radicalization – that is, by reformulating it as a war between us and them, our enemy, where there is no common ground for symbolic conflict. It is deeply symptomatic, for

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<sup>77</sup> Habermas, “Kant’s Idea of Perpetual Peace with the Benefit of Two Hundred Years’ Hindsight”, p. 114.

<sup>78</sup> Zizek, “A Leftist Plea for Eurocentrism”, p. 114.



example, that instead of class *struggle* the radical Right speaks of class (or sexual) *warfare*.

Zizek, following Jacques Rancière,<sup>79</sup> and having overcome the anti-eurocentricist obsession, suggests that, in contrast to all kinds of disavowals of politics, the notion of politics proper can be traced back to ancient Greece, where those members of *demos* who had no hierarchically sustained positions within the social structure (or those who simply resisted subordination) rose up against those in power on the basis of a presupposition that they were to represent the whole society, the *true* universality. For those who are not contented with their socially determined status, the only way to justify their resistance against subordination is to hold a universality claim in response to the claims of those in power.

Universality claim demands the *politicised* group's voice to be heard by the other members of the society; and furthermore, this same claim enables this group to present 'itself as the immediate embodiment of *society as such*, in its universality' against the particular power interests of those in power. Zizek concludes that politics proper always requires a shortcut in the relation of the particular to the universal: 'This identification of the nonpart with the whole, of the part of society with no properly defined place (...), with the universal, is the elementary gesture of politicization, discernible in all great democratic events (...)'

According to Zizek, the lack of this identification is the main source of post-modern evil. In facing postmodern forms of excessive violence or evil, we are no longer dealing with some kind of effect of the political pacification of the return of the repressed; rather, we encounter 'the case of the foreclosed (from the Symbolic),

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<sup>79</sup> Jacques Rancière, *La Méésentente: Politique et Philosophie*, Galilée, 1995.

which, as we know from Lacan, returns in the Real.<sup>80</sup> So we could suggest that, according to Žizek, the contemporary humanitarian, depolitically totalizing and so foreclosing ‘gaze of some beholder’ is the ultimate source of a radical evil – an evil which, in fact, is nothing but one of its ‘Janus faces’. With its supposedly depoliticized identity, it is this gaze that constitutes the twentieth century figure of evil, the Holocaust, as something not accessible to political analysis – that is to say, as far as political analysis is concerned, it must be as accessible as the gaze itself.

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<sup>80</sup> See Žizek, “A Leftist Plea for Eurocentrism”, p. 119.

## 5. Objectifying Evil: A Reversal

So far I have reconstructed a generic debate between those who conceive evil in terms of sublimity and those who conceive it in terms of banality, by critically rereading, through Arendt's theory of banality, the literary texts that Bataille reads in *Literature and Evil*,<sup>81</sup> and showed how both sides of the debate ignore the current political dimension of our subject matter. I will now read another narrative, Gaspar Noe's *Irreversible*, through Slavoj Zizek's perspectives on evil, to show how with Zizek we can accomplish the task of repoliticizing the conceptions of evil.

The Hegelian motto 'Evil resides in the gaze itself which perceives the object as evil'<sup>82</sup> is a necessary tool for Zizek who, in search for a designation for our contemporary, postpolitical European – and non-Eurocentric – attitude towards apparently depoliticized classifications of basic moral ideas, comes to introduce his original perspective on postmodern violence. Zizek's perspective enables us to identify a threefold psychic formula of evil in understanding the critical feature of our times: postmodern acts of excessive violence and cruelty.<sup>83</sup> Focusing on the

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<sup>81</sup> Georges Bataille, *Literature and Evil*, translated by Alastair Hamilton, Marion Boyars, 2001.

<sup>82</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. Miller, Oxford University Press, 1977, p. 401.

<sup>83</sup> Slavoj Zizek, "A Leftist Plea for Eurocentrism", in *Unpacking Europe*, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen Rotterdam – NAI Publishers, 2001, pp. 112-130. But as he notes, Zizek examines the three forms of evil more closely in his *The Metastases of Enjoyment, Six Essays on Woman and Causality*, Verso, 1994.

subjectivity of evil-reception, and in a sense (if I may propose an Adornoesque comment) *objectifying* evil with reference to this subjectivity of evil-reception,<sup>84</sup> Zizek was tempted to name Balibar's notion of excessive-nonfunctional cruelty,<sup>85</sup> the *id-evil*. Let me explain these concepts further by illustrating them with the narrative of a movie.

It is a bit difficult, and seemingly it was meant to be difficult to hear the 'Auslander raus' of the *Irreversible*, the film by Gaspar Noe of 2002. The shock of the first few scenes, where a man's head is crushed with a fire extinguisher and then beautiful Monica Bellucci is raped and beaten to death, shadows what we could call racist clichés that follow. But one is tempted to argue that, quite amazingly, Zizek's *straight* reasoning on the framework of the reverse mechanism of sublimation, as he exemplifies with the skinhead beating up foreigners, experiencing 'the protosublimating gesture of elevating a contingent Other (race, sex, or religion, for example) into the absolute Otherness of the impossible Thing, the ultimate threat to our identity, this thing that should be annihilated if we are to survive,'<sup>86</sup> coincides with the *reverse* sequence of scenes in the film. In the case of Zizek's skinhead scenario, first, we come across with pure evil, for considering the skinhead story 'we should leave all the talks about foreigners stealing our works or the threat they represent to our Western values aside' (as the film begins we bump into pure enthusiastic violence, we do not know anything about its background, all we can realize is that there is a real hatred), then after a closer look, we find that what bothers the skinhead in the Other is that the Other appears to entertain a privileged

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<sup>84</sup> See Theodor Adorno, *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Rodney Livingstone, Polity Press, 2001.

<sup>85</sup> Etienne Balibar, "Violence: Idéalité et cruauté", in *La Crainte des masses*, pp. 397-418.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid p. 120.

relationship to the object of desire (later in the film, we find out that, the head-crushing Albert Dupontel's idol of a woman, his ex-wife who is now untouchable to him, was raped by some man; as the film begins we see our hero crushing a man's head, but we watch to realize that the man whose head he crushes is not the rapist). It is difficult to defy the temptation of reading the narrative as a presentation of *the same* mindset with all its priorities and secondary rationalizations – with a real necessary reversal for its own purposes, that is, to create a true sequence concerning psychic significance.

Frankly speaking, *Irreversible* is the story of a beautiful middle class woman (Monica Belluci) – a gentle, temperate, motherly figure who not only takes care of her highly energetic and 'boyish' mate (Vincent Cassel) and her timid ex-husband (Albert Dupontel), but who is also pregnant (so her *motherhood* is not just figurative but dramatically actual) – raped and beaten to death (or rather raped anally to death: the impression of the rape scene is that, before this last sexual intercourse of hers, she had never been familiar with 'anal pleasure', so to speak, which is an important detail concerning her bourgeois background of sexual morality) in a tunnel by a drug addict who most probably is a drug dealer too, and seemingly an immigrant, unable to speak proper French, and also gay, at the same time a 'pimp' as one of the characters declares, a real maniac who sadistically enjoys to hurt others and watch others getting hurt; in short, the absolute evil, an absolute Other. While the boyfriend (who is the father Belluci's future child), in search for revenge, looks for the rapist together with two vagrants who promise to help find him, the philosopher ex-husband works hard to prevent him from doing something wrong (in fact later in the film, but chronologically prior to the main event, the ex-husband calls him a 'monkey', and throughout the whole story, he works hard almost like a superego agent to prevent him from doing

something wrong) – but at the end (which is the beginning of the film), the representative of maturity and of common sense, the civilized ex-husband himself, in his attempt to rescue his ex-wife's boyfriend (who, with a broken arm, is about to be raped himself by a gay friend of our rapist) exhibits an outburst of cruelty, with a fire extinguisher in his hands, performing a live show for the drug addict psychopathic gay maniacs who watch him with great enthusiasm.

Zizek points out the *universal* evil inherent in both parties, that is, both in the humanitarian civilized attempt to protect human rights and in the pure depoliticized evil (fundamentalisms, and, as Balibar says, the excessive violence performed by adolescents and the homeless) – and in our case, both in the rapist and in the philosopher. He accomplishes this by restraining the supposedly depoliticised claims of contemporary humanitarian world-view by arguing that 'humanitarian depoliticized compassion *is* the access of evil over its political forms',<sup>87</sup> and thus reducing the foreclosing claim of postpolitics to a subjective form of a power claim in whose gaze the contemporary notion of evil is constituted. One of the vagrants – again immigrants, this time they seduce – who promise to help the frustrated Vincent Cassel find the rapist, argues that 'revenge is a human right', as if referring to the *enjoyment* of a right, *jouissance*. The *id-evil* is born within the context of the elementary nature of the relationship between pleasure that strives for the reproduction of its own closed circuit and *jouissance* i.e. what remains irreducible to pleasure principle; thus, needless to say, it is not a constituent of a particular identity.

Now there are two main characters in the film: on the one hand we have the ex-husband who, in his efforts to pacify first the joyful couple, and then the frustrated trinity, is almost like a superego agent; on the other hand we have somebody else –

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

the pimp, the immigrant, the drug addict and drug dealer, the gay: the Rapist – the thief. And the narrative voice, taking into account the psychic significance of events, tells us the story through the eyes of our superego agent. It is really hard to imagine a worse combination of racist, sexist, and religious clichés but as one of the antagonists declares in the opening sequence of the film ‘time ruins everything.’ For the subjective gaze of the spectator who is never permitted to catch a glimpse of the story as a unique whole before the end, the reverse flow of time ruins this framework; substituting it with another one, i.e., the true structure of psychic mechanisms.

The first outburst of cruelty we face is that of the philosopher, so we could assume that we are expected to wonder from the beginning till the end the reason for this first explosion of hatred; then the story is not that of a woman getting raped, or a helpless impotent boyfriend who himself could be raped alongside his raped girlfriend. It is the story of an excessive violence which is nonfunctional, and an even more excessive one whose source is a depolitically totalizing moral universe delimiting violence. By postponing the ‘rest of the story’ and serving the best meal as the starting course, the narrative voice seems to say (like Žižek saying ‘we should leave all the talks about foreigners stealing our works or the threat they represent to our Western values aside’) that first we should leave the details aside, and consider the action in its purity; that the story is not going to affirm some sexist clichés at the outset; and even that the issue at hand is that of the ‘secret solidarity’ between ‘the violence that is not grounded in utilitarian or ideological reasons’ – that is, the *id-evil* – and the seemingly depoliticized, so called humanitarian empathy, which is nothing but one of its Janus faces. In fact, Janus, the Roman God of doorways and archways, is the perfect figure here who could help us grasp the core relation, as he was traditionally worshiped at the ‘beginnings’ such as harvest time, planting, marriage,

birth etc. Janus, on the other hand, represents transition between primitive life and civilization, between country side and city, between war and peace – between timid philosopher and Rapist.

Then, taken in its entirety, the major figure and the most compelling character of the *Irreversible* is the civilized ex-husband, Albert Dupontel, through whose eyes, ‘the rest of the story’ is some kind of complex rationalization for the so-called humanitarian ‘compassion’ – defender of the compassionate multicultural realm of equal rights (it does not matter whether he is face to face with a Chinese taxi driver or a Colombian transvestite, because in this universe, they are all ‘one in difference’ – in fact he once or twice lectures Vincent Cassel about these ideals), he ends up (or should we say begins?) as the most cruel of all characters; because in this realm, the only way to mark difference, to quote again, is ‘the protosublimating gesture of elevating a contingent Other (race, sex, or religion, for example) into the absolute Otherness of the impossible Thing, the ultimate threat to our identity, this thing that should be annihilated if we are to survive’. It is not the boyfriend who has stolen his beloved wife from him, nor the Rapist (it is not the Rapist whose head he crushes) – it is the immigrant, the pimp, the gay, or in short the Other that appears to *enjoy* a more intimate relation to the obscure object of his desire. It is this thief’s, this immigrant’s abundance of *jouissance* that is *the* danger. The ex-husband’s entire existence both in the night club where he, his ex-wife and her boyfriend entertain themselves (and where he does nothing but lecture and watch those around him), and in the Rectum, the gay club where he ends up with his ex-wife’s boyfriend (and where he performs his final – but primal – act of violence), reminds us Freud’s account of Rat Man’s face:



At all the more important moments while he was telling his story his face took on a very strange, composite expression. I could only interpret it as one of horror at pleasure of his own of which he himself was unaware.<sup>88</sup>

Zizek is tempted to tell us that he who has this expression in his face *is the most dangerous*; and it is his ‘quavering indecision’ that reveals us who he is.<sup>89</sup> *Irreversible* is *his* story – which, with the intervention of an exterior narrative voice, comes to include that which would completely be lost in a direct verbalization – and when we are told the part of the story where he performs his outburst of violence, we see the same indecision in his face; what exactly does he do when he stops and looks around him in that moment of hesitation, just after hitting the gay face a couple of times with his fire-extinguisher: is the shocking enthusiasm of his spectators, the gay maniacs, for the cruel act, his own hidden pleasure that he reflects to the Other? Really, what is it that makes him hit so hard with that fire extinguisher specifically to his enemy’s *face*? Is it a desperate attempt to conceal his other, Janus face? Is this why the film is named *Irreversible*?

If our story was that of a ‘return of the repressed’, the philosopher’s confrontation with the *Ténia* (tremendous nickname of our Rapist) deep in the *Rectum* and his great effort to abolish it would suggest a traditional clue for cynical homophobia, but as the problem we are dealing here is not that of a mere repression and pacification, but rather a more effective ‘foreclosing’ from the Symbolic – that is, in Zizek’s terms, the loss of the *appearance itself* – we encounter a return in the Real ‘in the guise of new racisms’, sometimes in rather complex forms, as seen in the philosopher’s case, and sometimes, as was told in the account of the Rapist’s

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<sup>88</sup> Sigmund Freud, “Notes upon a Case of Obsessional Neurosis”, in *Standart Edition of Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 10, Hogarth Press, 1955, pp. 166-7.

<sup>89</sup> Zizek, *The Metastases of Enjoyment, Six Essays on Woman and Causality*, p. 1.

interference, in the form of apparently impotent, excessive and nonfunctional outbursts of violence.

And finally, there is another figure in the film: the woman. And again, as our narrative voice points out with perfect clarity (by presenting Bellucci her mouth closed by men first in the rape scene and then in bed of happiness with her lover) we should not overlook the sacrificial character of this being... Monica Bellucci is the center of the humanitarian compassion and sympathy throughout the entire story of our moral tragedy: she is the victim whose rights were violated by men who ‘obey the injunction to follow to their utmost limit the thoroughly pathological, contingent caprices that bring them pleasure, ruthlessly reducing all their fellow humans to the instruments of their pleasure’<sup>90</sup> (the reversal of the categorical imperative) – and in fact her entire being in this universe of apparently equal men is associated with that of a victim. But her *raison d'être* as the victim is the very motive which reduces her ‘humanity’ to a ‘combination of functions resisting death’; and as Badiou would add to this: although human as the executioner is nothing more than a vile animal, we should have the courage to add to this that human as the victim, is generally not something more precious.<sup>91</sup> What deprives Bellucci of her basic human faculty which would enable us to define her as a ‘being with speech’ is her very position as the victim. Through this ‘victimizing’, she was excluded completely – her mouth being closed both by her lover and the Rapist.

‘There are no crimes, only actions,’ one of the protagonists declares in the first scene of the film in response to his friend who is desperately in love with his own daughter and who, because of his illegal relation to his daughter, had spent a couple of

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<sup>90</sup> Zizek, “Kant and Sade: The Ideal Couple”, <http://www.egs.edu/faculty/zizek/zizek-kant-and-sade-the-ideal-couple.html>, 03.02.2005.

<sup>91</sup> See Alain Badiou, *Ethics, An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, Chapter 1.

years in prison. He continues: ‘they say this is wrong and you get it wrong or not’.

Zizek, conforming Hegel’s motto in subjectifying evil, would add to this that, there is a threefold evil, one inherent in all actors: Ego-evil, Superego-evil, and *Id-evil*: ‘How are we to combat effectively this Id-evil which, on account of its “elementary” nature, remains impervious to any rational or even purely rhetorical argumentation?’<sup>92</sup> is the question. This ‘inherence *in all actors*’, and its logical consequence that this inherence cannot serve as some kind of an a priori criterion for natural differentiation, is the most effective politicisation of evil.

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<sup>92</sup> Zizek, *The Metastases of Enjoyment, Six Essays on Woman and Causality*, p. 71.

## Conclusion

Today, evil is treated almost like a definitive thing in itself and determines what ethics should be. We have to return back to assess it as a variable within the ethical interrogation. Bataille's and Arendt's opposing approaches to the subject matter, taken in this study as representative of the twentieth century conceptions of evil, neglect the ever-changing nature of evil. In post-9/11 discourses on evil, ignoring this fact has resulted in the use of evil 'as a political tool to obscure complex issues, to block genuine thinking, and to stifle public discussion and debate', and this was possible only if all forms evil were taken as completely depolitical and thus 'self-evident'. Refurbished critical methods of Alain Badiou and Slavoj Zizek respond to this situation by sticking to the 'subjectivity of evil', emphasizing the political implications of current conceptions of evil, and proposing genuinely and explicitly 'politicised' conceptions of evil in response to those supposedly depoliticized versions.

Bernstein's *The Abuse of Evil* opens with a question from Hannah Arendt: 'Could the activity of thinking as such, the habit of examining whatever happens to come to pass or attract attention, regardless of results and specific content, could this activity be among the conditions that make man abstain from evil-doing or even

*condition* them against it?’<sup>93</sup> Arendt’s emphasis here on ‘thinking’ and yet avoidance of ‘results and specific content’, which are not characteristic of her critical stance regarding evil, summarize the basic arguments of this study. To quote again from Bernstein: ‘...[i]nterrogating evil is an ongoing, open-ended process.’ We have to keep on interrogating, keeping always in mind that ‘evil resides in the gaze itself which perceives the object as evil’.<sup>94</sup> If evil will not be what characterizes the Other, then it is either *universal* and inherent in all parties or, to mention again its logical equivalence, a ‘genuine nothing’. Moralization of evil as such is nothing but its ‘re-politicisation’, and this is what we exactly need to do in the midst of the banality of today’s ‘evil talks’ on violence.

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<sup>93</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind: Thinking*, vol. 1, Brace Jovanovich, 1977.

<sup>94</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 401.

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